

Fowler, Robert, 1853/4-1926

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A Man of Liverpool and his Art

A MAN OF LIVERPOOL AND HIS ART. BY R. JOPE-SLADE.

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Gift

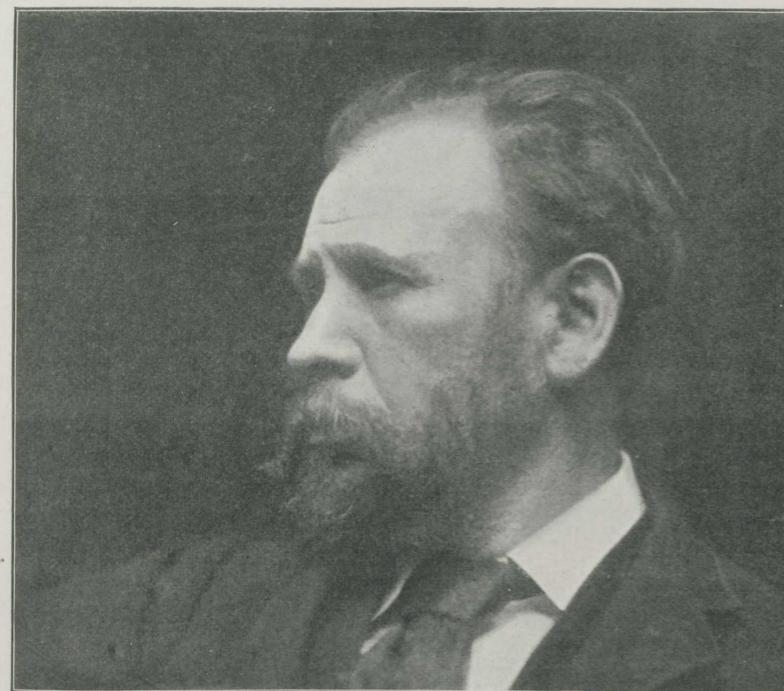
IN Robert Fowler's workroom the window that gives on London used to have the blind down. This was no oversight; but wilful. *Mais nous avons changé tout cela.* Robert Fowler's parents being Scottish, the idea of an artistic son had much in it that was repugnant to them. And if the bairn did not lisp in numbers, he drew pothooks at three, of a distressingly superfine quality. The bent of infancy soon straightened out to the old people's terror, and the hand of the boy became of fair skill, and the mind that guided it patiently imaginative. The boy was at an early age sent out to begin his life engagement with the common weal, and he found himself in commerce, unhappy, useless, unpromising, and helpless, his sole consolation the play of his fingers. In the briefest time, to his delight, he was sent about his business. Concession was made to his taste, inasmuch as he was apprenticed to an architect; and there is no reason to suppose that Modern Athens might not to-day owe some of its finest palaces to Sir Robert Fowler, had the cat jumped that way. But Master Fowler had developed the caricaturist; the proprietor heard chuckling in the office; he called the lad before him, bidding him produce his work. He discovered no mere outline, serious or grotesque, but little compositions based on the heroic, much Scott, Byron, and Shakespeare, and maybe Fennimore Cooper, the god of the adolescent of that day. Fowler was bidden do twenty such studies before the next Saturday; his employer received them, looked at them carefully, then thrust them into his desk. Robert's father was sent for: the result of the consultation was the sending of the young man to town, and the recognition of his career.

Mr. Fowler was born, it would seem, not in his beloved Liverpool, the town of a vast area, but near to the ancient, grey town of St.

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Andrews. It was in the picturesque old Scottish Kingdom of Fife that he learned sympathy and knowledge of the sea; and from fisherfolk acquired lore of legendary heroes of the immeasurable deep, which ploughed into his brain, and finds expression in many bizarre compositions.

As a youth, Mr. Fowler paid the Royal Academy something of the necessary homage desirable for a young painter. He sent in his drawings, obtained the permit to attend the schools, but he went no further than probationship. Before then, at Hatherley's, morning, noon, and night, he sought and found instruction and sympathy. To the British Museum, National Gallery, and South Kensington he went in worshipful mood day in day out, and exposed the highly sensitised plates of his inmost self to the influence and memory of all that is noblest, purest, and most gracious and restrained in Hellenic art. For the rest he worked from within the theory and practice of his craft, studying collaterally the recesses of literature, science, philosophy, and seeing the work of brothers of the brush, and the master achievements of the glorious contingent of the past in public galleries and private collections. But the frail and always neurotic Fowler was doomed to see his genius outpaced by physical debility, and some restful years were needed, and fortunately obtained, for the buckling on of the full armour of his strength.



ROBERT FOWLER, R.I.

FROM A PHOTOGRAPH

A Man of Liverpool and his Art

Those were days when he indulged in many enthusiasms, now paled before his intense concentration in the slow and profound evolution of his own art. It would have been well for him if, as is the most sagacious custom of young painters, he had sojourned a season or so in the metropolis, sealing to himself a few friends, and making a multitude of acquaintances. Impatient, he held London laggard in recognition, and, troubling very little about name and fame, established himself

Under the hollow-hung ocean green (page 90), a girl of singular sweetness and beauty of form: her arms, with dimpled elbows, clasping the right leg round the polished ivory limb. Her short dainty features are turned in an upward direction, and a mass of brilliant Venetian tresses crown her brow and mantle her to the left. The delicious little childish torso is pure and faultless Greek, and the body is beautifully rounded. She looks up through the translucent emerald realms of Poisidon; and



A STUDY

BY ROBERT FOWLER, R.I.

in the first maritime city in the world, Liverpool, finding himself, contrary to tradition, a prophet in his own country. Since he adopted Liverpool, she has re-paid the honour done her by placing his marvellous *Eve* and *Ariel*, both in the Walker Gallery.

Despite his avoidance of London, he in 1891 became a member of the Royal Institute of Water Colours, where until this year he has been a constant and important exhibitor. His first contribution to the Institute was *L'Etude d'une Tête*, a study which won him instant recognition. Since then, *inter alia*, I would mention-beautiful works attracting universal criticism and admiration:

Cynthia, argent and crescent, smiles down through the limpid element with the silvern benignity of a vision. Nothing more poetic has been seen in the Institute. *The Streamlet* (page 97) represents a girl "standing with reluctant feet where the brook and river meet"; a graceful hand is placed on a head poised like a flower on its stem, and the draperies are matchless in the simplicity of their folds; she looks down for companionship to purple irises, and the dappled water repeats in uncertain zigzags the outline of her form; behind her the forest breaks upon a pale sky.

In 1893 a very large water-colour called *Sleep* held the place of honour, and found a Continental

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A Man of Liverpool and his Art

buyer. Of the many pictures exhibited about this time, those I have described are fairly representative of his work which ranged through the whole gamut of fertility and invention.

But Mr. Fowler does himself the injustice of disliking reference to this most honourable part of his career, and will not thank me to be more explicit. He has been seen with distinction at the regrettably defunct Grosvenor, where the catholicity of Sir Coutts Lindsay's hospitality placed his *Ancient Mariner*, now in Munich, amongst the very elect.

A detail not to be overlooked is Robert Fowler's genius for poster-designing. Amongst his best are those for the Walker Art Gallery, and a bizarre green one, quaintly Japanese, which I saw all over Liverpool, advertising a fancy fair; whilst several ideas for wall ornamentation were remarkable by reason of their lack of resemblance to his ordinary work. Confound him (Gainsborough used a robuster expletive), how various the man is, referring, of course, to Sir Joshua. To escape the feverish come-and-go of South Castle Street, in the very heart of the pulsation of Liverpool's great affairs, up the stairs into what is essentially a painting-room, is a fresh and pleasant contrast. There are two chambers, both spacious and bare; a few chairs and bits of things, an Empire couch, an item from Hipplewhite's classic chisel, and another from Sheriton's prettier shop; some superb and many-coloured Japanese prints, and, writ on the wall in charcoal, Emerson's lines: "Life is too short to waste in critic peep or cynic bark, quarrel or reprimand, 'twill soon be dark; up, mind thine own aim, and God speed the mark!" Three or four tiers of small landscapes (which are, in the opinion of many, Robert Fowler's best work), show an interesting and somewhat impressionistic expression of the mood of the moment, and are all

direct from nature, subtle in colour, and exquisite beyond words. Upon the easel is a mystic composition, *The Silver Shell*, a soft, far-away, delicious harmony, in pearl and silver-grey, with slender-trunked trees, and the subdued murmur of a vague and distant sea. In the foreground, two maidens, who appear to have been just materialised, whose gracious curves have the simplicity which is art, and feeling that is Athens—intensely modern antique. As a shadow which passes, one recalls Albert Moore; but to a very much greater extent the decorative arrangement and the pattern suggest Japan. If I have laid much stress on *The Silver Shell*, it was with intention. It goes without saying that in many of his canvases will be found matter not the least degree akin; but, in the main, features on which I have dilated will re-occur, and I can more crisply deal with them.

Fowler's thoughts frame and flow with too great velocity. But it is weighty matter; and, phrase for phrase, succinct enough. Words come easily in



A STUDY IN CHALK

BY ROBERT FOWLER, R.I.

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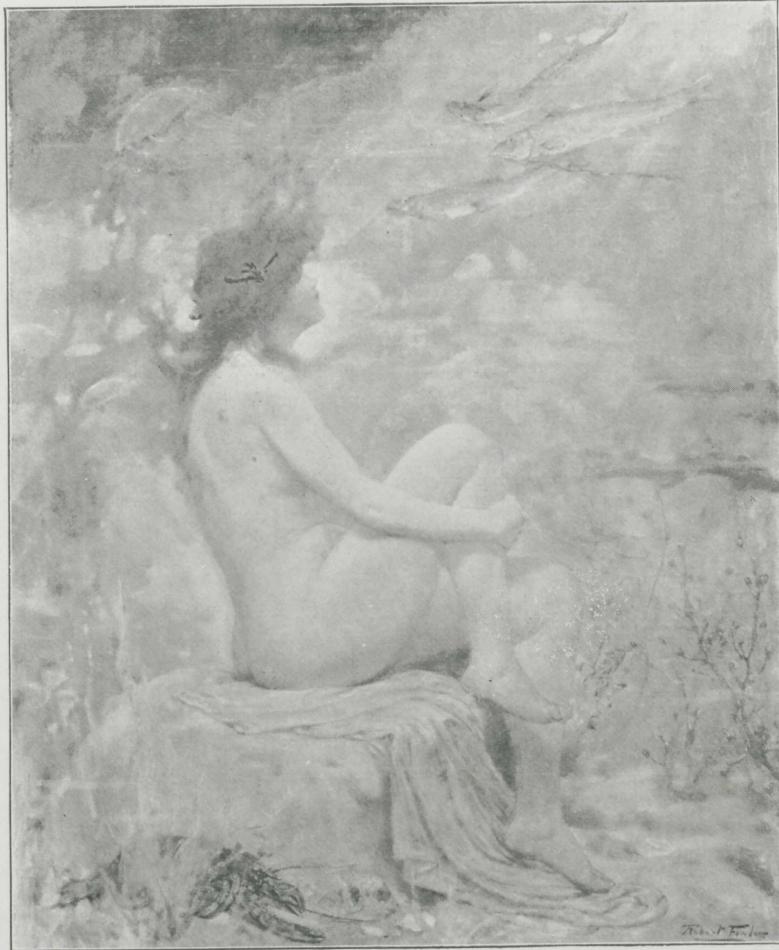
their proper place—many a casual epigram brightens them; but you must strain every nerve in attention as you listen. It is with iterated insistence, at every point and pause in our conversation, that he tells me that Japan is all in all to him, aught else immaterial. He does not seem to have been very much influenced by such examples

in short, the desire, ambition, and scheme of a man's life.

At Munich the appreciation of English art has grown amazingly during the last decade. Certain leaders of what is known for convenience as the Newlyn School, though now a mere historic phrase, the Pre-Raphaelites, the Glasgow School, Albert

Moore, Lord Leighton, and Burne-Jones are deities in the new Munich mythology; but one of the most favoured of all is Robert Fowler, and from Munich he has been exhaustively monographed, an honour which he shares with Watts and Burne-Jones. At the Champs de Mars, of late years, his canvases have attracted attention, and his name now is seldom absent from the catalogue.

Mr. Fowler's own conception of himself is interesting; he sits, he says, like a spider in his corner, spins his web, the gossamer threads of its fantasy capturing new art ideas east and west, north and south, wherever man reads or writes, paints or sings, thinks, breathes, or has his being, especially in Nippon. It is not by misadventure that I omitted in my description of the work-room the noble piano which dominates the outer chamber. The painter is absolutely idolatrous of music, it is the joy of joys, and mistress of his life. Though he has



"UNDER THE HOLLOW-HUNG OCEAN GREEN"

FROM A PAINTING BY ROBERT FOWLER, R.I.

(In possession of Ernest Seeger, Esq.)

of modern mysticism as Fernand Khnopff, and others of that school, but he speaks with enthusiasm of such pictures as the Belgian's *Sphinx* and *Animalism and the Angel*, and I think they have counted for something in his evolution. Before an end is made of the conversation, I have learned the intricate mechanism, the discontent with the done, the eagerness about the to-do, the sentiment of latent poetry, the sub-lying symbolism, something uncanny and eerie,

never touched the ebonies and ivories, nor any contrivance for the production of harmonious and dulcet sound, he is a splendid judge both of composition and execution; and rarely alone, especially on Fridays, he draws to his painting-room much that there is of genius and youth, in whatever form expressed, in Liverpool; especially the great but as yet unknown musician, vocal or instrumental; and if the truth were known, there is many an artist—I use the word in its broadest



"THE VOICE OF SPRING."
FROM A PAINTING BY
ROBERT FOWLER, R.I.

(In possession of Ernest Seeger, Esq.)

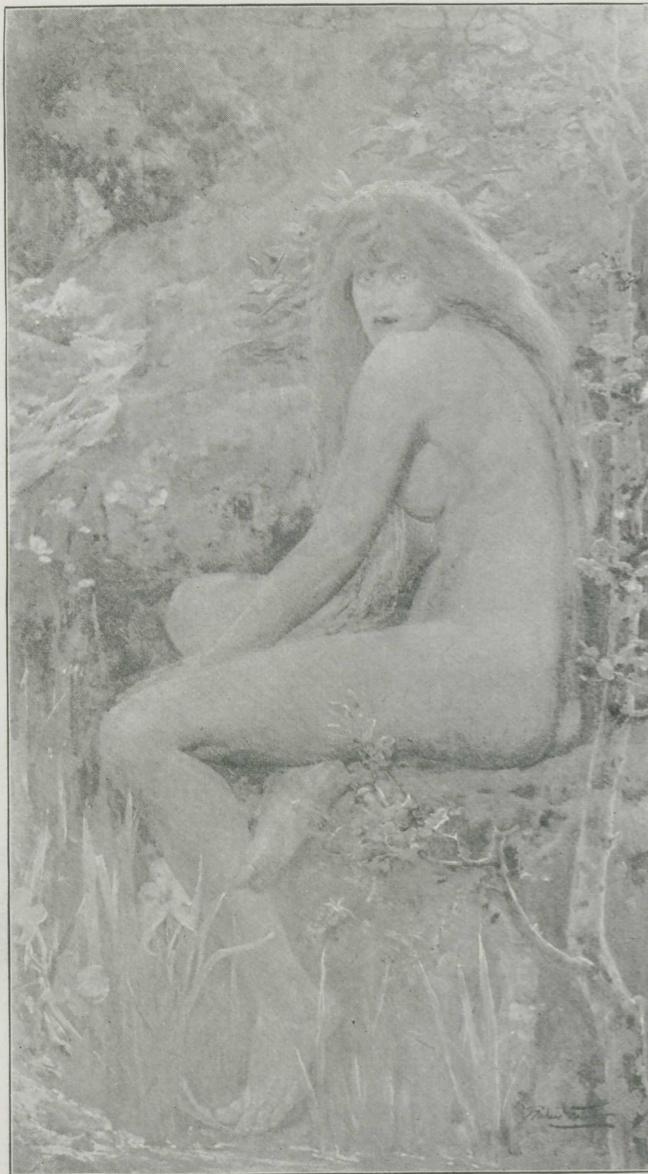
1896 The Studio 1896

A Man of Liverpool and his Art

sense—who doubtless owes his ultimate triumph to Robert Fowler's generosity, praise, and rousing exhortation in the dark hour when the world was deaf and blind to him.

Some four or five miles from the studio at West

A charming and very attractive collection of sketches by Alfred East, McColl, and Fred Hall is here; and a host of quaintly whimsical and most artistic things by David Woodlock, go well with the Japanese series. A portière on the door



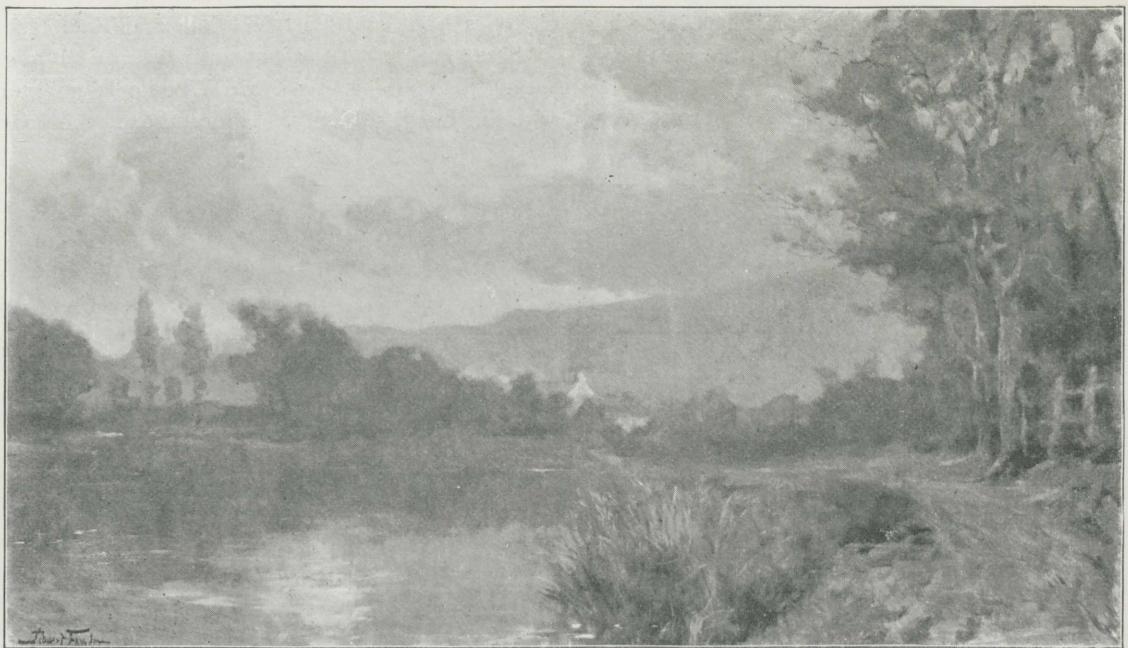
"STARTLED"

FROM A PAINTING BY ROBERT FOWLER, R.I.

Derby, Mr. and Mrs. Fowler find a home. Of hospitality and kindness one may only make hint in a thing so dignified and businesslike as a monograph upon a talented painter. The walls of the drawing-room are covered with many minute and beautiful water-colours from various hands; *kake-mono's* and articles of *vertu* from Japan abound.

of palest blue rich silk on which the light plays a thousand winsome tricks,—a bird, jewelled with scarlet, sits on branches of red-brown, which spread in ever-varying fashion; it is surely one of the most beautiful decorative fabrics that ever left the Mikado's isles. In the dining-room you remember a capital head and shoulders of the

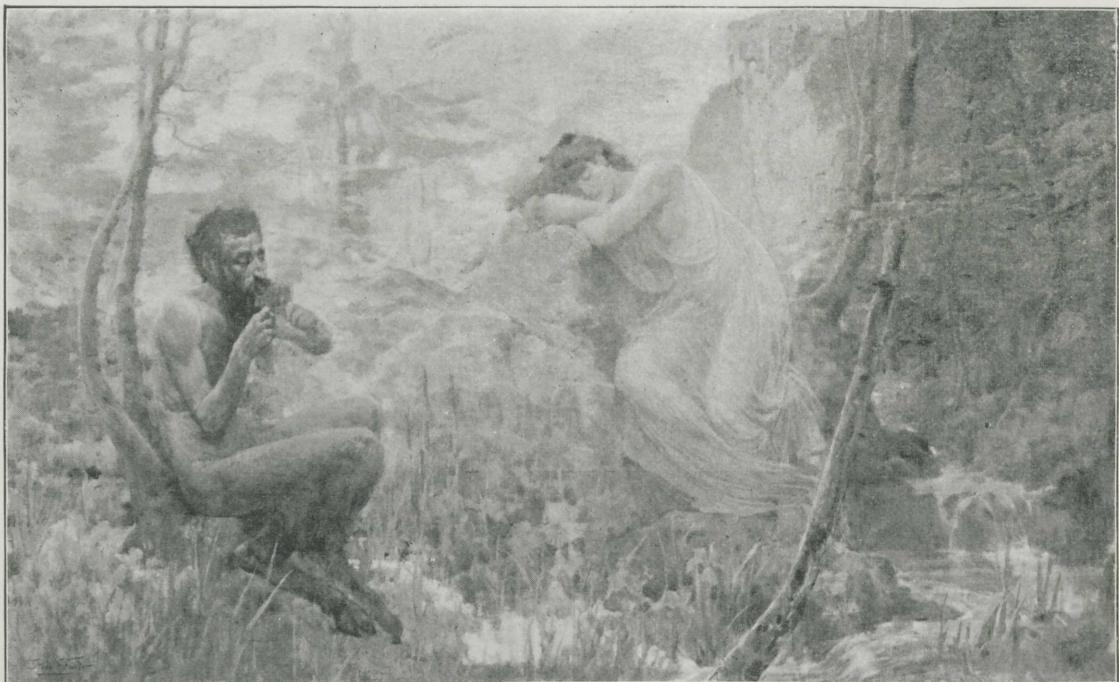
A Man of Liverpool and his Art



"COMING NIGHT"

FROM A PAINTING BY ROBERT FOWLER, R.I.

(*In possession of Ernest Seeger, Esq.*)



"THE ENCHANTED GLADE"

FROM A PAINTING BY ROBERT FOWLER, R.I.

(*In possession of Ernest Seeger, Esq.*)



STUDY IN LEAD-PENCIL
BY ROBERT FOWLER, R.I.